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FEATURED

Candidate forum: County Clerk

By BRAD STACY The Morehead News May 4, 2018



David Ermold, Elwood Caudill Jr., and Jamey Jessee.

By Addie Hogan



(Editor's Note: This is the second in a series of articles from the recent candidate forum featuring the contested races in this year's primary.)

Three candidates for Rowan County Clerk participated in the Primary Candidate Forum held last Tuesday at the Morehead Conference Center.

Moderated by Morehead State Public Radio's (MSPR) Chuck Mraz, candidates fielded several questions from The Morehead News editor Stephanie Ockerman, MSPR's assistant news director LeeAnn Akers, and The Trailblazer's Jacob Lindberg.

Each candidate was offered a 90-second opening statement and 90 seconds to answer three questions.

The three Democratic candidates who participated included David Ermold, Elwood Caudill Jr., and James “Jamey” Jessee. Not participating but on the ballot is Nashia L. Fife.

The winner of the primary race will face Republican incumbent Kim Davis in the general election.

In his opening statement, Ermold said he is a 14-year resident of Rowan County with two Masters degrees from Morehead State and a college professor. He feels it’s important for the voters to elect someone with strong Democratic values who is willing to serve all citizens of the county.

“I also believe it’s important to trust the next county clerk as the office is responsible for overseeing our county elections and I’m committed to working with the board of elections to make sure the process is fair and efficient for all,” Ermold said. “I will modernize the office and make it more efficient by updating the website and creating an active online presence that will allow easier access to forms and other pertinent information. I will evaluate the processes in place and work to streamline the services already available.”

Ermold added he thinks the county clerk should have a strong presence in the community and work hard to promote voter registration and participation in local elections.

Caudill, who said he was both a lifelong Democrat and resident of the county, said he’s been in the Property Valuation Administrator office for more than 20 years and he will utilize what’s he’s learned throughout the years from both his current office and the clerk’s office because both have similar programs and details.

Jessee, also a lifelong resident of the community and a graduate of Morehead State with a degree in business management and finance, said he’s spent most of his professional career working with the public in various capacities.

“I believe my education and professional experience qualifies me for the job,” Jessee said. “It is my drive to serve my community that led me to run for this office. I believe I have the experience, integrity, and innovative ideas that will create a clerk’s office that all Rowan Countians can be proud of. My 20-plus years of business has taught me that the key to quality service is building relationships with those you serve.”

As clerk, Jessee said he would ensure the office was accessible and meets the needs for all citizens.

"I will make it my goal to create a positive rapport with every citizen coming into my office," he said. "It will also be my goal to create relationships with our office and local schools to better educate our future voters about civic responsibility."

Lindberg then asked the candidates about the possibility of an influx of media covering the election this year due to national interest stemming from 2015 and how the community and county should respond to that attention.

Caudill said he was working in the courthouse when news companies flooded the judicial square and he wished he never had to witness it.

"You didn't know what was coming in that building and it made our jobs very difficult," Caudill said. "If I get through the primary in May I will not be bringing back any media. I won't have that. There won't be any media to run from."

Jessee said it's expected in November to have quite a bit of media covering the general election. This community is close-knit and he hopes there's a way to keep it that way, he said.

"I wish there was a way we could debate and talk without the media. It's not needed, it's just not," Jessee said. "It should have never happened in this first place. If elected to office I will serve all citizens. If I was clerk then it would have never happen to begin with. We will deal with it as it comes as far as the media is concerned."

Ermold said what unfortunately happened in 2015 brought a lot of attention to the county and some more will likely be brought in as the race progresses. He and his husband were denied a marriage license by Davis three years ago.

"We have a little bit of work to do and I think we need to reaffirm the welcoming nature of our community," Ermold said. "We are a beautiful people here. There's a reason I wanted to stay even after all that happened. I'm willing to stand here for what I believe in and for this community because I have faith in you and doing the right thing. I've been around long enough to know you are my friends and neighbors and I support you and I know you support us as well."

Ermold said as far the media, a positive message is going to be sent and the media will understand that Rowan County is one of the greatest places to live in Kentucky.

Candidates were then questioned if they were to lose in May, if they would support the winning Democratic candidate.

Jessee said yes, saying he's become friends with Ermold over the past few months and has known Elwood for years. The three have similar views and stances, he said.

Ermold said yes, believing the Democratic Party needs to be united when it comes to the general election and he plans on supporting this county and the Democratic Party as much as he possibly can.

"I think we all have different paths and ideas of what we think is right, but I think the bottom line is we will all end up coming together at the end," Ermold said.

Caudill said he would support the Democrat who wins in May as long as the campaign is ran on good faith and that the candidates stick together and not steer in different paths to cause turmoil.

"I will definitely support the Democrats as long as there isn't a reason not to," Caudill said.

The final questions for the potential county clerks was what steps would be taken to ensure voter fraud wouldn't occur.

Ermold said the clerk would have to work closely with the board of elections to help lay out the foundation of the proper steps to ensure that doesn't happen.

"We also need to try to open up a little bit of the voting process to students on campus and the public in general to get them involved," Ermold said. "I think the more people we have involved in the voting process the more successful it will be."

Ermold stressed that one of the biggest ways to deter voter fraud is having a completely transparent process.

Caudill said he's not sure if there's voter fraud in Rowan County, but wanted to make it clear that if he wins the clerk's seat and seek re-election at some point, he would opt out of the oversight of the voting process to ensure transparency.

"I'd also like everyone to know I'm not running against Kim Davis, the current clerk," Caudill said. "I'm running for the clerk position because I have worked toward it for over 21 years."

Jessee said he obviously wouldn't want fraud to occur and he would utilize steps to make sure that never happens.

"This has to begin in the classrooms," Jessee said. "The county clerk has to be more involved in the school system. If I'm elected I'll be in the schools teaching the importance of voting and how to vote. We can start at a very young age and grow the program and teach our kids about how important the position of clerk is and what it does."

The Primary Election is Tuesday, May 22, with polls open from 6 a.m. until 6 p.m.

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